

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 42 | Issue 2

Article 25

June 2018

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Oana Sabo

Tulane University, osabo@tulane.edu

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Recommended Citation

Sabo, Oana (2018) "Clandestine Migration and the Politics of Form in Nicole Caligaris's Les Samothraces," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 2, Article 25. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1990>

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Clandestine Migration and the Politics of Form in Nicole Caligaris's *Les Samothraces*

Abstract

This article analyzes Nicole Caligaris's *Les Samothraces* (2016), an experimental literary text about undocumented migration, in light of Theodor Adorno's aesthetic reflection on the politics of literary form and Thomas Nail's political theory of the migrant. Reading *Les Samothraces* against the grain, I argue that the text's literary form encodes the political tensions of its contemporary moment, namely the tension between the free movement of migrants and Europe's policing of its borders. Analysis of formal elements—literary characters, plot structure, and inclusion of photographs—that depict migrants who escape capture by regimes of surveillance shows that the text is an apology for migration and a critique of border politics.

Keywords

contemporary French literature, clandestine migration, the figure of the migrant, the politics of form

Clandestine Migration and the Politics of Form in Nicole Caligaris's *Les Samothraces*

Oana Sabo
Tulane University

Nicole Caligaris's *Les Samothraces* ('The Samothracians,' 2000/2016) recounts the perilous journey of three female characters—Madame Pépité, Sambre, and Sissi la Starine—who flee an unnamed country in the hope of a better future. The text's spatial and temporal indeterminacy and its roughly drawn characters discourage presentist readings through the lens of contemporary migration. *Les Samothraces* moreover draws on epic poetry, myth, and photography to create a generically hybrid text that resists easy categorization. Although formal experimentation invests the story with universal dimensions, the text nonetheless offers an oblique take on contemporary migration. Some recognizable tropes—rapacious smugglers, dangerous border crossings, and detention centers—anchor the text in today's political climate. Reading *Les Samothraces* against the grain, I argue that the text's literary form encodes the political tensions of its contemporary moment, namely the tension between the free movement of migrants and Europe's policing of its borders. Such a political reading highlights the potential for fictional works about migration to be implicated in representations of migrant subjects. Analysis of formal elements—literary characters, plot structure, and inclusion of photographs—that depict migrants who escape capture by regimes of surveillance shows that *Les Samothraces* is an apology for migration and a critique of border politics.

Les Samothraces belongs to an emerging subgenre of French migrant literature that narrates the experience of clandestine migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.¹ Fictional works by Olivier Adam, Arno Bertina, Isabelle Condou, Delphine Coulin, Julien Delmaire, Shumona Sinha, and Alice Zeniter, among others, while ranging from mimetic to experimental, underscore the need for a tolerant attitude towards unauthorized migrants as an alternative to European anti-immigration policies. Such works focus on the figures of clandestine rather than elite migrants and on the materiality of migration rather than on cultural issues. In this way, they contribute to an understanding of clandestine migration and asylum seeking as distinct modes of migration in today's globalized world. Significantly, French fictional narratives about clandestinity and asylum are not only didactic or socially engaged but also self-reflexive about the ways in which they represent migrant subjects. Literary texts, in general, are uniquely positioned to at once represent and question these representations. *Les Samothraces*, in particular, asks to what extent migrant experiences are communicable and clandestine migrants legible. At stake in Caligaris's text are writing and reading practices that seek an

ethical relationship with migrant subjects and that display an awareness of writers' and readers' complicity in acts of representation and literary consumption. *Les Samothraces* is thus an ideal case study for examining political and ethical questions through specifically literary concerns.

But how can literary texts be read as political in the absence of overt political references? In what ways does aesthetic form have ideological relevance? To elucidate the interdependence of the aesthetic and the political in *Les Samothraces*, I turn to Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Adorno addresses the relationship between art and society, contending that art, as a product of a particular historical period, is inextricably linked to social life. At its most autonomous, art seeks to position itself in opposition to empirical reality, but in this very act of dissociation, it nevertheless retains traces of the social. As Adorno puts it, "the unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form" (8). In other words, the social is not external but inherent to art, and form mediates content even as it appears distinct from it. The method Adorno proposes—"immanent analysis" (477)—highlights the formal properties of artworks and relates their internal contradictions to the tensions of the empirical world.² Viewed in this light, works of art offer imaginary solutions to unresolved social problems and conjure up possibilities unforeseen in current political debates. Even though artworks imagine scenarios that may not readily translate into political praxis, their political force, according to Adorno, resides precisely in their potential to suggest alternatives to real-life tensions. As he states, "Praxis is not the impact works have; it is the hidden potential of their truth content" (350). Critical of politically committed works, whose impact he considers to be restricted to local contexts or to amount to mere propaganda, Adorno insists that the aesthetic and the political are not incompatible. Rather, "truth content always points beyond the immanent aesthetic makeup of art works towards some political significance" (391). This duality, Adorno contends, characterizes every single work of art.

Adorno's immanent critique can be fruitfully applied to Caligaris's *Les Samothraces*. I use his insight that "aesthetic form is a sedimentation of content" to bring out the political potential of a text that appears to be solely concerned with formal matters (Adorno 7). Caligaris herself appears to endorse the key role of literariness in her interviews, where she reinforces the idea that literature is not a political instrument and should therefore be responded to as literature. By her own admission, Caligaris is not a politically committed writer: "je ne crois pas à l'efficacité, ni même à la possibilité d'un roman 'engagé'" (quoted in Nicolas) 'I don't believe in the efficacy, let alone the possibility of a "committed" novel.'³ As she explains, "Si mon travail d'écrivain a une dimension politique, c'est littérairement. C'est dans ce qu'il produit dans la littérature et pour la littérature" (quoted in Guichard 25) 'If my work as a writer has a political dimension, it is in a literary sense. It's about what it achieves in literature and for literature.'⁴ Because

Les Samothraces takes an oblique approach to migration, it invites readers to reflect on the migrant as a subject position. The text asks: What is a migrant? Who can become one? What effects do regimes of border control have on migrants' selfhood? And is there room for resistance? In other words, *Les Samothraces* gets at the heart of the figure of the migrant, attempting to comprehend and nuance it.

The Figure of the Migrant

A literary text that foregrounds clandestine migration requires a conceptual model that avoids celebrating migrant subjects or divesting them of all power. Prominent theories of mobility have privileged motion over stasis, proposing concepts such as "routes" (Clifford) and "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai). These notions, however, characterize economically privileged subjects. Other theories, which underscore migrants' status as "guest" (Rosello) or "bare life" (Agamben), stress their limited or complete lack of agency vis-à-vis their hosts. Bridging these two trends, philosophy scholar Thomas Nail has recently theorized the ways in which migrant subjects have historically been constituted at once by enforced mobility and their resistance to power structures. Nail's political theory of the migrant will serve as an overall framework for analyzing *Les Samothraces* because it speaks to Caligaris's ambivalent representation of migrant subjects as both precarious and subversive. However, while Nail has little to say about the lived experiences of migrants, Caligaris fleshes out the "figure" of the migrant through her portrayal of vulnerable female migrants who support each other in their journey. She examines notions of gendered migration, vulnerable bodies, and acts of solidarity, which are absent from Nail's abstract model. *Les Samothraces* thus updates Nail's conception of the migrant, shedding light on a particularly relevant subject position of our time—the undocumented female migrant.

In *The Figure of the Migrant* (2015), Nail develops a political theory of the migrant that takes as its point of departure the migrant's fundamental characteristic, their movement. He argues that, historically, migrant figures such as the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletarian have been constructed as a result of their "expulsion from their territorial, political, juridical, or economic status" (2). However, the migrant is defined not only by techniques of social expulsion, but also by resistance to the social order: "It also has its own forms of social motion in riots, revolts, rebellions, resistances" (7). Nail makes three key points that are useful to an analysis of *Les Samothraces*. First, his concept of "figure" mediates between the abstract and the concrete, allowing him to sketch out social types (nomads, barbarians, etc.) while also grounding them in specific historical periods. As he explains, "as a figure, the migrant refers both to empirical migrants in the world *and* a more abstract social relation. It is irreducible to either" (16, original emphasis). Second, Nail's redefinition of the migrant through movement stresses the migrant's process of becoming, which deflates essentialist conceptions of

identity. As he asserts, “migratory figures function as mobile social positions and not fixed identities. One is not born a migrant but becomes one” (3). The figure of the migrant can be understood not as a specific person but as a flexible subject position that changes according to different circumstances (departure, journey, arrival) and in response to different forces that control social mobility. Third, agency for Nail is a key aspect of the migrant’s encounters with regimes of social circulation.

Les Samothraces can be read through Nail’s concepts of figure, becoming, and agency. The text represents the migrant as a figure—a trope that bridges the universal and the particular, the fictional and the empirical, or visibility and shapelessness—in order to interrogate the claim that migrant subjects can be captured visually and hermeneutically by regimes of surveillance as well as by acts of reading and writing. The characters, whose contours are deliberately imprecise, bridge the concrete and the abstract by offering possible scenarios for the travels and trials of empirical migrants, while also discouraging—through sparse features—readers’ identification with real-life migrants. Furthermore, Caligaris positions her characters on a migratory spectrum: from voluntary exiles (at journey’s start) to detainees (under police arrest), to stateless (after destroying their papers) to, finally, stowaways (fearful of being thrown into the sea). The various incarnations of the migrant figure suggest that clandestinity is a precarious subject position that characters inhabit by force or by choice. In other words, the text foregrounds migrancy as a circumstantial rather than an identitarian phenomenon by depicting the ways in which, throughout their journey, the characters become migrant subjects during violent clashes with regimes of control and detention. Last, Caligaris shows that the heroines are not only subjected to disciplinary power but also resistant to it, mostly through acts of solidarity and generosity that arise in spite of their vulnerability. In what follows, I explore three key aspects of *Les Samothraces*—the notion of literary character, the plot structure, and the imbrication of text and image—to reveal how the text’s literary and visual representations, instead of faithfully capturing migrant subjects, render them opaque and unstable.

Literary Characters as Figures

Caligaris’s approach to the notion of literary character suggests her refusal to represent migrant subjectivity in a realist way. She employs theatricality to steer her text away from the genre of politically committed literature and towards broader contexts of interpretation. The three heroines are abstract figures more than full-fledged characters, in keeping with the recent tendency of French fiction to move away from character development.⁵ That is why Caligaris conceives of her characters as “silhouettes” or “des voix, avec une tonalité particulière” (quoted in Guichard 24) ‘voices, in a specific key.’ At the same time, they are slightly

personalized. Typographically, Madame Pépité's, Sambre's, and Sissi's words are printed in fonts of different sizes to distinguish them from the anonymous group of migrants they lead—a chorus-like presence that serves as a sounding board for their thoughts and actions, as in ancient Greek tragedy.

The notions of silhouette and voice, which suggest a certain degree of abstraction, thus aim to dissuade readings of characters through the exclusive lenses of present-day migration. As Caligaris states, “*les Samothraces* ne se réfèrent explicitement à une actualité précise. . . . À côté de problèmes actuels, dont on ne peut s'abstraire, y jouent des questions plus anciennes, plus fondamentales: quitter sa famille, partir de la maison du père” (quoted in Nicolas) ‘*Les Samothraces* does not explicitly refer to precise current events. . . . Beside present-day issues, which one can't ignore, there are older, more basic questions: leaving one's family, leaving one's father's house.’ Departure, an oft-used motif in ancient tragedy and epic poetry, signifies a human right. That is why the refrain “*PAR-TIR TA-TA-TA*” (4, original emphasis) ‘De-part ta-ta-ta’ punctuates the narrative. Specifically, *Les Samothraces* inscribes itself in literary traditions of the past through its title allusion to the Winged Victory of Samothrace (the name of the statue discovered in 1863 on the Greek island of Samothrace) and, as Bruno Blanckeman notes, by employing the tropes of tragedy (law, justice, and politics) and epic poetry (departure, wandering, and the struggle for survival) (74). The title, as Caligaris explained, suggests that the act of departure connotes not only rupture but also victory (quoted in Nicolas). The political gesture of Caligaris's allusion to myth and epic poetry is that the reference seeks to represent migration as an ordinary phenomenon of *longue durée*.

Moreover, the characters' obsessive words and gestures recall Samuel Beckett's puppet-like characters. Caligaris's protagonists are Beckettian figures in their absurd waiting, compulsive behavior, spasmodic gestures, and minimalist speech. They are placed in extreme situations that require fighting for survival and experience extreme emotions such as pain, nausea, or shock—as in the opening scene, for example, where they jostle for space, inch their way forward by taking advantage of others' fatigue, or fight for the only available bench. The author's literary universe is a chilling world and her language is unsparing in its violence. Consider, for instance, the scene that records the effects of police violence on migrants' bodies when they seek to escape from the detention center: “les membres craquaient, . . . les têtes s'écrasaient les unes contre les autres, . . . les vertèbres se séparaient définitivement, . . . les yeux s'enfonçaient pour toujours dans les trous de crâne et . . . les gencives se défaussaient de quelques-unes de leurs mauvaises dents” (29-30) ‘limbs were broken, . . . heads were smashed into each other, . . . vertebrae were split up for good, . . . eyes sank once and for all into the holes of the skull and gums were relieved of some of their bad teeth.’ In scenes such as these, Caligaris performs an X-ray of the migrant body, offering us bruised body parts for

scrutiny, albeit not with surveillance technologies' clinical aim of transparency. Hers is an aesthetic of proximity that, through close-ups of migrants' corporeal parts, magnifies their suffering in order to disorient readers and limit their visual grasp of the migrant body. In this way, she forecloses easy empathy and appropriation of the pain of others that photographs of migrants in the media, for example, may encourage.

As a privileged site of biopolitical management, the body is the primary locus of both vulnerability and resistance to state practices of surveillance. Caligaris highlights the deleterious effects of clandestine migration by zooming in on the characters' bodies. In photographic style, she depicts migrants in close-up and often highlights various body parts to deflate readers' claims to visual or hermeneutic mastery. Insofar as this technique denies readers' access to migrants' subjectivity, Caligaris problematizes the readability of clandestine migration. In other words, the undocumented migrant is legible only in a fragmentary, partial manner. The author's representation of migrant bodies thus diverges from the goals of knowledge and transparency displayed by regimes of surveillance and control. Take, for instance, Sambre's fierce attempt to climb the cliff leading to the border: "Grimper . . . les joues marquées à vie par les éclats de pierre, les mains comme des plaies, n'importe, les dents cassées d'être tombée vingt fois, les mâchoires bloquées par le froid, les muscles en train de flancher, moi qui n'ai pas l'habitude, tant pis: je monte" (21) 'To climb . . . the cheeks scarred for life by rock shards, the hands like wounds, whatever, the teeth broken by having fallen twenty times, the jaws clenched by the cold; the muscles about to give in, me who's not used to this, never mind: I'm climbing.' This focus on Sambre's aching body parts underscores border regimes' deleterious effects on migrants as well as the latter's resilience in the face of physical obstacles. Sambre's migrant body in this scene is too fragmented and damaged to be identified by border technologies of surveillance as threatening or controllable. She is both vulnerable and forceful. Indeed, how do Caligaris's characters relate to power in ways that at once are affected by it and act on it?

Turning to Judith Butler's redefinition of vulnerability as part of, rather than as antithetical to, resistance helps us reflect on the relationship between migrant bodies and institutional power in *Les Samothraces*. In her co-edited collection, *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), Butler bases her theorization of vulnerability on her view of the body as "less an entity than a relation," or as dependent on "the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living," even as it may seek to affect those power structures on which it depends for support (19). In other words, Butler understands embodiment as both relational and performative, that is, both "acted on and acting" on institutional structures (24). This is, then, the double meaning of vulnerability: "a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (24). Butler is concerned especially with modes of collective resistance such as public assemblies, strikes, and barricades, showing how vulnerability can be

mobilized as a political resource in practices of resistance. To put her idea differently, those engaged in protest deliberately expose themselves to power, and thus exert their agency in spite of, and even because of, their vulnerability.

Butler's double-edged concept of vulnerability is particularly useful in a narrative like Caligaris's, whose main protagonists are female. Defining vulnerability not as "a subjective disposition," but as "a kind of relationship" to a field of forces, challenges views that associate vulnerability with female subjects and agency with male figures (Butler 25). It shifts the focus from subject to space and, in particular, to their interaction. I therefore turn to the heroines' interaction with practices of policing in carceral spaces in order to reveal how their vulnerability can be located in the grey zone between "receptivity and responsiveness" (Butler 25). In other words, the heroines' capacity to be affected by practices of surveillance and control is inextricably linked to their ability to act upon these very practices.

Plot Structure: Agency in Surveillance Spaces

Les Samothraces stages encounters between migrants and spaces of surveillance, thereby allowing readers to imagine the ways in which migrants submit to, as well as resist, nation-states' regimes of biopolitical control. Ironically, their progression through these spaces is accompanied by loss (of material belongings and identity papers), depersonalization (by becoming undocumented migrants), animalization (they resort to aggressive survival strategies in the detention camp), and effacement (as stowaways in the belly of a cargo ship). The migrant journey is thus a slide into precarity and invisibility, yet it does not preclude acts of resistance.

The series of spaces that Madame Pépite, Sambre, and Sissi la Starine traverse are well apprehended through the concepts of "flows" and "junction[s]" that Thomas Nail proposes. According to Nail, flows connote the "continuous movement" of people, while junctions represent points in space or time when a flow is redirected "back onto itself in a loop or fold" when an obstacle has blocked its way (24, 27). Thus, the visa office in front of which the protagonists congregate, the border they cannot cross, the cliff they struggle to climb, the detention center from which they seek to escape, and the ship hold in which they hide are so many junctions that impede or delay their circulation.

In the opening scene, a dense crowd is queuing in front of a permanently closed visa office. Its push-pull movement is described as "[une] masse flottante, secouée de lames fortes qui venaient se briser contre les portes du guichet fermé" (3) 'a floating mass, shaken by strong waves that came smashing against the doors of the closed counter.' The obstacle against which these ripples break is not only a point of stability in characters' agitated movements but also the symbol of a border that restricts mobility. In this context, the heroines stand out from the crowd by

defying state-enforced stasis and supporting each other. Madame Pépité and Sissi brutally push their way forward to help Sambre, ostensibly sick, to reach the front of the line. Partly out of solidarity, partly out of cunning, they mobilize Sambre's vulnerability to resist confinement. Figures of movement, above all, the heroines assert their mobility as "[un] droit" (33) '[a] right.' This legal junction thus elicits forms of migrant solidarity that pose an alternative to controlled movement. While the text defends the human right to migrate, the opening scene invalidates this universal law. The politics of form is evident in the contrast between the right to circulate and the closed visa office.

The bus ride to the border is another movement that comes to an abrupt halt, requiring the heroines to overcome their vulnerability. When the migrants realize that the office will remain closed, they leave without a visa, squeezing into the only coach available. In utter chaos, more than a hundred migrants pile their belongings in the bus, on top, underneath, and even sideways. Some slide into the luggage compartment, attempting to ride clandestinely. Traveling light, Madame Pépité, Sambre, and Sissi come into focus via their psychic capacity to endure the promiscuous contiguity of other bodies and ignore the deaths of their travel companions. In a poignant scene, the driver—a people smuggler—orders the passengers to sing and dance to muffle the desperate cries of the people suffocating in the luggage compartment. At the mercy of the smuggler, they acquiesce, despite intense physical and mental discomfort: "Gris sous nos bobs, crispés dans un sourire, tête ballante au rythme de n'importe quoi, forçant nos yeux creusés à ricaner comme il faut" (18) 'Ashen-faced under our sun hats, smiling nervously, moving our heads to whatever tune, forcing our sunken eyes to snicker properly.' Caligaris's politics resides in her aesthetic choices such as the use of the absurd, the grotesque, and the macabre.

The steep cliff that leads to the sea instead of the expected border is yet another obstacle. When the driver provokes an accident, the migrants are left stranded on a slippery hill. While climbing in search of a path to the border, some regularly fall into the sea. The language matter-of-factly registers the banality of migrant deaths: "Ça fait *wouf* en contrebas, c'est tout" (20, original emphasis) 'Sounds like *wouf* below, that's all.' Others reach a point where they can neither climb nor descend. Holding on to a rock for dear life, Madame Pépité, Sambre, and Sissi express, in alternating interior monologues, their determination to defy gravity. Whereas, as migrants, they are vulnerable to smugglers and dangerous paths, they nonetheless exert their agency through their capacity to endure excruciating physical pain and to persist in their journey. Sissi, for example, muses that "j'ai trop de sang pour une cariatide" (22) 'I have too much blood to be a caryatid.' Instead of being "un marbre blanc, pour soutenir tout / ce rocher" (22) 'a white marble, to support / this whole rock,' she pictures herself as "une victoire ailée" 'a winged victory' about to take flight. Caught between the cliff and the sea,

Sissi uses her awareness of her aching body to conjure up mobilizing female models. She resists arbitrary borders by rejecting the immobile caryatid—a mere supporting pillar, in her view—for the more dynamic Winged Victory of Samothrace. The juxtaposition between shocking images and a matter-of-fact tone as well as the depiction of characters caught in liminal positions encode political questions about the possibilities for migrants' circulation.

The detention center where the characters are placed after being arrested by the police is another junction that arrests migrant flows, redirecting them—via forceful return by train—to their point of departure. Situated in a converted railway station surrounded by barbed wire, the detention center is a liminal space that bridges motion (the departing trains) and stasis (the awaiting migrants). Moreover, it connects opposing practices of protection and management: “difficile de dire si c’était un sauvetage ou une arrestation” (22) ‘hard to say if this was a rescue or an arrest.’ The slippage between care and detainment indicates, as Miriam Ticktin has argued, that humanitarian practices of aid conceal the attempt to manage the very bodies they purport to save (5). This dialectical logic is evident in the authorities’ practices of identification and control. Whereas the police conceive of clandestine migrants as bodies to be detained, surveilled, and documented, migrants use their own bodies as sites of resistance. Instead of filling out administrative forms, they withhold personal information, all giving the same name or pretending to have forgotten their name. Having ingested their identity papers shortly before the arrival of the police, they become “[d]es gens sans nom” (26) ‘nameless people.’ Anonymity and amnesia are acts of resistance against biopolitical control. Yet statelessness is also an emblem of utmost precarity. In Butler’s terms, the migrants are at once agentic and vulnerable, for they not only defy technologies of classification but, by delaying their identification and return, also submit to living under dehumanizing conditions. Forced to resort to survival strategies whereby they rummage, steal, and punch in attack or self-defense, they blur the line between the human and the animal: “Nous sommes devenus des becs. Des mains: paumes et griffes . . . / Nous sommes devenus des bédriers, capables de renverser n’importe quel homme debout en fonçant sur lui par surprise” (25-26) ‘We’ve turned into beaks. Our hands: palms and talons . . . / We’ve turned into rams, ready to knock down any man standing by charging into him unexpectedly.’ The animalization of the migrants is both an indictment of their precarity in the detention center and an affirmation of their survival skills. Madame Pépète, Sambre, and Sissi’s strategies of self-defense and mutual support challenge the authorities’ assumptions about migrants’ physical and psychological weakness during the medical examination they are forced to undergo. In other words, the heroines disprove institutional views of migrants as suffering and in need of medicalization. (They receive pills more often than food.) Liminality (human/inhuman) allows them to resist precarity, while

solidarity (they bribe their way onto a ship with Madame Pépite's money) helps them escape detention.

Madame Pépite, Sambre, and Sissi take their self-effacement one step further, as stowaways on a cargo ship. Their life depends on their invisibility, or at least on the sailors' willingness to overlook their presence, for they are aware that they are "*LE SURNOMBRE, LES SANS-DROIT*" (38, original emphasis) 'in excess, without rights.' Sailors can throw them overboard with impunity as they are devoid of political and legal protection. That is why they strive to "suspendre notre existence, . . . ravalier ce que nous sommes, disparaître" (33) 'suspend our existence, . . . swallow up what we are, disappear.' Invisibility is, for the heroines, a means to escape control, since disciplinary power is exercised on subjects that are visible (Foucault 187). Whereas they previously dwelled on the border between the human and the animal, the protagonists are now suspended between life and death. Or rather, they experience a sort of death-in-life, as the image of the dark, cold, and damp ship hold suggests. The ship hold, however, is not only a tomb that potentially condemns the heroines to death, but also a womb-like, regenerative space (Blanckeman 75). Here they form solidarities, remember and mourn the migrants who perished on the way, and pay their debts to those left at home by acknowledging that their own freedom comes at the cost of abandonment. Madame Pépite, Sambre, and Sissi experience at once self-erasure and self-renewal, resisting power through shared acts of mourning and solidarity that acknowledge their vulnerability and interdependency.

Despite its bleak content, *Les Samothraces* ends on a hopeful note, with the image of the heroines stealthily getting off the ship. In this scene, they are far from personifying the Victory of Samothrace's majestic descent from the skies to a triumphant fleet. Instead of arriving at the prow of a ship, they scurry off at journey's end, as they ponder: "Notre voyage n'existe plus. / . . . Maintenant, les vrais emmerdements commencent: *c'est là*" (41, original emphasis) 'Our journey is no more. / . . . Now the real hassle begins: *over there*.' Significantly, they bracket their journey and stress their new beginning, which continues beyond the text's concluding line. Their fate—their chances of integration in a new society—lie outside of the pages of the book. This lack of textual closure indicates that Caligaris shifts the issue of migrant subjects' place in their host country from the text to the real world, where it becomes the readers' responsibility. It is in this sense that aesthetic form is political.

Text and Image: An Aesthetics of Opacity

Initially published in 2000 by Mercure de France, *Les Samothraces* was reprinted by Le Nouvel Attila in 2016, during the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe. The second edition is printed as a leporello—a book that unfolds like an accordion. The front features the text, while the back includes 1166 miniature

photographs of migrants by the artist Éric Caligaris, the author's brother. This playful format draws on Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay's experimental mix of poetry and painting in *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (*Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France*)—a long poem that celebrates mobility and speed and whose pages also unfold concertina-like—as well as on Victor Segalen's poem *Stèles*, from which it borrows the concept of opacity. (Segalen inserts Chinese ideograms that suggest cultural opacity for non-Chinese speakers.)

The visual representation of migrants is designed to reinforce Nicole Caligaris's literary representation. Since Madame Pépite, Sambre, and Sissi are mobile and opaque characters that interrogate notions of reader accessibility, Éric Caligaris's migrants are silhouettes with barely distinguishable human shapes. The images, extracted from his series *Nuée* ('Swarm'), are highly blurred pictures of photographs of migrants he had found on the Internet. Aiming for distorting effects, the artist brought his camera very close to the computer screen without concern for perspective, color balance, or depth of field. The result? Photographs of migrants caught in flight and deliberately out of focus that defy easy representation. In fact, they challenge viewers to take a closer look at the mysterious shapes and reflect on how they view migrant bodies and whose bodies are visible in contemporary societies. Because these shapes are not immediately recognizable, a note on the back cover identifies them as images of migrants.

Éric Caligaris' palimpsestic images interrogate the resemblance between the visual representation and its referent, discouraging mimetic interpretations. As unfaithful copies of screen shots, distorted beyond the point of recognition, they disallow voyeuristic or empathetic gazes. The black and white colors as well as the contours of migrants' bodies conjure up medical X-rays of body parts, evoking technologies of diagnosis and management. Nevertheless, the idea that migrants escape representability becomes clear when we fold out the pages of the seven-meter long book. The impression is that of an endless proliferation of superimposed pictures of different sizes—some blown-out, others too small to grasp—that will spill out of the printed page. As a visual archive of migrants in motion, this swarm (*nuée*) of photographs connotes flight, speed, and ephemerality, implying that migrants cannot be contained in their photographic frames. Indeed, Éric Caligaris conceives of migrants as spectral rather than heroic figures, for they erase the material traces of the original photographs, escaping viewers' grasps. The photographs added to the second edition are no mere additions to Nicole Caligaris's text. When read alongside it, their opacity greatly enhances the author's depiction of her characters. Both Nicole and Éric Caligaris attempt to defamiliarize the figure of the migrant through aesthetic form, increasing the critical distance between the reader and the migrant characters, preventing acts of appropriation, and maintaining that migrant subjects are not fully legible.

In conclusion, in my immanent critique of *Les Samothraces* I have attempted to read the text poetically to uncover its political content. Caligaris's formal strategies are a key locus for thinking about political issues related to migration—namely, migrants' rights to mobility, gendered vulnerability, and resistance to forms of state surveillance. The interplay between text and image, the characters' vague contours, the plot structure, and the open ending invite political questions about migrants' presence and roles within host societies. In other words, it is through form that the author engages with the politics of representing unauthorized migrants. Although Caligaris holds that literature is its own end, *Les Samothraces* can be read as an apology for migration and an indictment of the arbitrariness of borders insofar as it articulates an aesthetic of mobility through spatial images and mythological figures connoting movement. What is more, the text proposes alternative models to think about clandestinity than those of precarity and victimhood. To return to Adorno, literary thinking is useful precisely through its potential to imagine new scenarios to real-life tensions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions.

Notes

1. For studies of contemporary migrant literature as a literary genre in a French and Francophone context, see Xavier and Sabo.
2. For a similar methodological approach to art and literature as products of the social and political contexts of their era, see Balibar and Jameson.
3. All translations of French-language quotations are my own.
4. Indeed, even when Caligaris tackles social and political issues—civil war in *La Scie patriotique* ('The Patriotic Saw,' 1997), unauthorized migration in *Les Samothraces* ('The Samothracians,' 2000/2016)), transit zones in *Barnum des ombres* ('Shadows in Disarray,' 2002), and imprisonment and torture in *Okosténie* (2008)—she does so in oblique ways.

5. In his discussion of the notion of character in the contemporary French novel, Warren Motte points out that “traditional features of character—psychological depth, for example, moral coherence, development over time, plausible disposition and motivation—are fundamentally otiose” (51). As he suggests, “at issue is the problem of representation” and “its conditions of possibility” (53, 56).

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